

PAREMIOLOGICAL ASPECTS

Ronald Grambo
Kongsvinger, Norway

This paper aims at discussing the tasks of paremiology. Sometimes it is worthwhile trying to define the means and the goals of the science to which one is devoted, the more so when the science is relatively new.

The year 1931 was a very important one. Archer Taylor published his famous, seminal book The Proverb. It is quite impossible to do any serious work on paremiology without having read and, for that matter, reread this book. It has been reprinted in 1962 with a fine preface by Taylor himself in which he makes a summary of recent research. Professor Taylor states that the study of proverbs has changed for the better and that this study is flourishing. This remark of his made me reflect: What is now the status of paremiology?

Let us first have a closer look at the so-called Wellerisms. Let me quote a couple of Wellerisms, both Norwegian: "At long last! said the girl, got a sweetheart." "It is not a big party, but a good party, said Kontus, drank alone." They consist of several components more or less tied together. One component is not mentioned at all, namely the person or the animal that utters the whole Wellerism. The audience to whom the Wellerism is directed, is not mentioned either. The next component to be taken into consideration is the utterance itself. Then the verb usually comes and that designates the action of saying the utterance, then the subject of that verb and finally the phrase that describes the conditions under which the utterance was said. The relationship between these elements has been discussed by Alberto M. Cirese.¹

However, much is left to be done in this respect. One wants to know to what degree language habits and grammatical peculiarities may have contributed to the syntactic and lexical structure of Wellerisms in various countries. One would also get an insight into the emotional and intellectual attitudes of the persons using Wellerisms in their conversation. The conditions under which Wellerisms are used should be investigated. It seems that Wellerisms are prone to form cycles. We can think of the many Wellerisms dealing with the relationship between wife and husband. In that case, what are the Wellerisms that are apt to create cycles and which are the reasons for such events? Are there any Wellerisms that are used only by women, by married women, by young unmarried girls, by older people and so on? Are there social groups that are more devoted to enliven their conversation with Wellerisms than others? Is the structure of Wellerisms different from daily speech? To what extent do Wellerisms represent an outlet for social repression? What sort of persons are ridiculed in Wellerisms?²

These are difficult questions to answer. We need more dissertations such as the one written by Iris Jarvo-Nieminen:³ She has a wealth of information about the function of Wellerisms in Finland. Of course, the function varies from one situation to another. A common feature is nevertheless that they provide a verbal shortcut: a Wellerism saves one from going

into detail. She also finds that language boundaries form a major obstruction to the spread of Wellerisms.

It seems to me that the morphology of the Wellerism is not sufficiently investigated. The verb "to say" is nearly always used in Wellerisms to designate the action of saying the utterance quoted. This verb is, at least in Norway, used in the imperfect. That should mean that this action was considered ended, belonging to the past. But how do people feel about this? In my opinion the contents of the Wellerisms are felt as something eternally human, even if the situations described are ridiculous or even silly. I think therefore that we perhaps should introduce a new concept here, namely neutral imperfect (as an analogy to neutral present: the river runs through the town) to accentuate the fact that the contents, the message of the Wellerisms are conceived of as belonging to every epoch, to every place.

A very special type of Wellerism is represented by the so-called latent Wellerism. The expression has been coined by the Greek paremiologist Demetrios S. Loukatos.⁴ These are Wellerisms where the author, if we can use such a term here, is omitted. Loukatos mentions several Wellerisms of this kind that he has collected. Sometimes it is extremely difficult to grasp the fundamental idea behind such Wellerisms. It happens that Wellerisms of this sort allude to anecdotes or fables. (Loukatos mentions for instance: "C'est le vent qui m'a fait tomber . . .". The explanation to that one is given by the collector himself: "La phrase est sortie d'une anecdote, qui se dit pour Nasreddin Hodja"). The reason why such Wellerisms occur is that the allusion involved is known by the person to whom it is addressed. It is an abbreviated form. But it may not be so simple. Perhaps tradition has forgotten the person that says the utterance. However, this should be investigated further.

Archer Taylor in The Proverb,⁵ makes the statement that Scandinavian tradition revels in Wellerisms. But in France they are scarce. Italian examples are difficult to find. Celts love to use Wellerisms. I think that one should focus interest on the age and geographic dissemination of Wellerisms. Certainly, Wellerisms are geographically restricted. But how and why?

Let us now direct our attention towards real proverbs. The problem of classification has attracted some interest. The Finnish paremiologist Matti Kuusi has devised a system and has introduced some new terms. Time will show whether they are useful. I refer to his paper "Ein Vorschlag für die Terminologie der parömiologischen Strukturanalyse."⁶ Proverbs that are built on the same pattern (Schema) he calls "structurgleiche Sprichwörter." Proverbs having the same inner architecture, but different components he calls strukturgleiche Synonym-Sprichwörter ("Sus docet Minervam-Imberbis senes docet-Kandjambwena oku ula yin' oondunge" that is "Baby elephant teaches its mother, Ovambo in Africa"). When the structure and the fundamental elements (Baukern) are the same but the idea is different, we have kongruente Sprichwörter. Of course, one must get to know the types of proverbs because otherwise it is impossible to make any catalogue of them. Maybe the time is not ripe yet for such a tremendous undertaking.

However, Matti Kuusi outlines such a catalogue in Proverbium 15.⁷ His point of departure is a paper by Archer Taylor, "No House is Big Enough

for Two Women."⁸ Kuusi makes an abstraction of the contents of this type of proverb, the headline runs as follows: Two (rivals do not agree) in one (place).

However, national catalogues must first be made, then the idea of creating an international catalogue can be realized. This is rather a long way to go. But Professor Kuusi has at least blazed the way, so to say.

Is it possible to classify the types of metaphors found in proverbs? This area is terra incognita indeed.

Archer Taylor wrote about metaphors in his book, but much is nevertheless to be done. The so-called adynatom symbols, for instance, are of some interest. These metaphors designate tasks that are impossible to do such as to pour water by means of a sieve or to make ropes of sand. This conception is often met with in legends and folktales.⁹ The proverbial metaphor to pour water by a sieve is found both in proverbs (in Låle) and in hagiographic legends and folktales.

These metaphors present many problems to the paremiologist. One wants to know their age and geographic distribution. They are found both among the Indo-Germanic and the Semitic nations. But what about so-called primitive peoples?

10

Many proverbs allude to folk narratives. Many times such proverbs contribute to folk narrative research. But they can make the paremiologist cudgel his brain, if the folktale or legend referred to has fallen into oblivion. But one presumes that proverbs dealing with forgotten folk narratives will soon undergo the same fate: be forgotten. In Norway several proverbs allude to folk narratives. The proverb that I now shall quote is incomprehensible without its background. "Femte spelaren er under border" (The fifth player is under the table). This Norwegian proverb reminds us of a migratory legend about the Devil joining the card-playing party.¹¹ It would be of some interest to investigate whether such proverbs can have an independent life in folk tradition separated from the narrative and to see what happens to them then. In Norway too we meet with the famous utterance by the fox: "They are sour, said the fox, he jumped after the berries of the rowan tree, but did not reach them." As far as we know, foxes don't usually eat berries from rowan trees. But originally this was told about grapes of wine. It is, of course, an allusion to the famous folktale type of the fox and the sour grapes.¹² But why has the Norwegian proverb berries from the rowan tree? Such problems arise in discussing this type of proverb.

Religious proverbs also raise some principal questions. A typical Norwegian example: "One does not climb to heaven without a ladder." This must refer to the heavenly ladder mentioned already in Genesis 28: 10-17 and that is a rather recurrent phenomenon in Christian mysticism.¹³ Another example, a famous one at that: "Man proposes, God disposes." This proverb has a long history; we find it in Proverbs 16: 9: *Cor hominis disponit viam suam! set Domini est dirigere gressus eius.*¹⁴ The religious proverbs in Norway and as far as I know also in other European countries do not contain any violent, ecstatic outbursts. The language is always neutral, clear and very sober. Indeed, the strict form of the proverb is an obstacle against this. Religious language is generally full of emotions, ecstatic exclamations. But that is not the case with

proverbs. The mission of religious proverbs is to create a sentiment of familiarity about the religious concepts. They have also the task of tying the group, or the society, where the proverbs are used, more closely together. They are a means to evoke a feeling of solidarity among people sharing the same religious conviction. This is a vast area of research.

Folk beliefs of all kinds are reflected in proverbs. The colors red, white and black represent moral qualities sometimes. Colors associated with feelings have not yet been treated by anyone (e.g. yellow with jealousy). In Norway legal proverbs yield an interesting area, because absolutely nothing has been done here.

In this manner we can continue because paremiology is a new science. Above all, we need papers and books on individual proverbs. Archer Taylor has written many excellent papers about such individual proverbs, their age, their changes, their distribution.¹⁵ A gigantic work was undertaken by Professor Kuusi in his brilliant Regen bei Sonnenschein zur Weltgeschichte einer Redersart.¹⁶ This is a dissertation about "The Devil Beating His Wife," a traditional paraphrase for the sun shining through the rain. It is indeed also a fine methodological guide. If we had several more such dissertations at our disposal, we should be better equipped for the study of proverbs, then we could tackle the complicated questions of how proverbs arise and also die. Why did, for instance, the Norse proverb kold eru kvennurat die out, become extinct? It is found several times in Norse literature and even in a Norwegian ballad. But I am at a loss to understand why such a simple proverb became forgotten.

It is high time that the Norse proverbs as found in sagas and in Eddic mythology should be submitted to a painstaking analysis. I have the impression that several of them have only lived in literature and have been transferred from one saga to another such as epic motifs. Are any of the famous remarks of the sagas in reality Wellerisms? But let me finish my modest ponderings here. All things have an end.¹⁷

FOOTNOTES.

- 1
Alberto M. Cirese, "Wellerismes et micro-recits," Proverbium 14 (1969), 384-390.
- 2
Siegfried Neumann, "Aspekte der Wellerismen-Forschung," Proverbium 6 (1966), 131-137.
- 3
Iris Jarvo-Nieminen, "Suomalaiset Sanomukset (Finnish Wellerisms)," Dissertation, University of Helsinki, 1959.
- 4
Demetrios S. Loukatos, "Wellerisme 'latents'," Proverbium 9 (1967), 193-196.
- 5
Archer Taylor, The Proverb (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1931), p. 211.
- 6
Matti Kuusi, "Ein Vorschlag für die Terminologie der parömiologischen Strukturanalyse," Proverbium 5 (1966), 97-104.
- 7
Matti Kuusi, "How Can A Type-Index Of International Proverbs Be Out-Lined? An Experiment and Five Questions," Proverbium 15 (1970), 57-60.
- 8
Archer Taylor, "No House Is Big Enough For Two Women," Western Folklore 16 (1957), 121-124.
- 9
Martti Haavio, "Omöjlighetssymboler i finsk epik," Saga Och Sed (1956), 5-15; Festschrift till Edwin Berger den 13/5 1956, Uppsala (1956), 73-83; Ronald Grambo, "Umulighetssymboler i folketradisjonen," Maal og Minne, Oslo (1963), 60-71.
- 10
Archer Taylor, "'Audi, Vide, Tace,' and the Three Monkeys," Fabula 1 (1957), 26-31; Julian Krzyzanowski, "Two Old-Polish Folktales," Fabula 2 (1958), 83-93; Julian Krzyzanowski, "'We Rule The World And We Are Ruled By Women'," Fabula 3 (1959), 270-274; Julian Krzyzanowski, "Sprichwort und Märchen in der Polnischen Volkserzählung," in Volksüberlieferung: Festschrift für Kurt Ranke zur Volkendung des 60 Lebensjahres, ed. Fritz Harkort, Karel C. Peeters, and Robert Wildhaber (Göttingen: Otto Schwartz & Co., 1968), pp. 151-158.
- 11
Reidar Thoralf Christiansen, The Migratory Legends, Folklore Fellows Communications, No. 175 (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, 1958), pp. 24-28.
- 12
Stith Thompson, The Types of the Folktale, Folklore Fellows Communications, No. 184 (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, 1961), p. 34.

13

Eugene Louis Backman, Jungfru Maria Nyckelpiga (Stockholm: Norstedt, 1947), pp. 102-144.

14

Taylor, The Proverb, p. 55.

15

Wayland D. Hand, "Writings Of Archer Taylor On Proverbs And Proverbial Lore," Proverbium 15 (1970), 4-8.

16

Matti Kuusi, Regen bei Sonnenschein zur Weltgeschichte einer Redensart, Folklore Fellows Communications, No. 171 (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, 1957).

17

Taylor, The Proverb, p. 30.